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SECSTATE FOR PDAS LAROCCO, U/S TUTWILER, A/S HARRISON, NEA AROMANOWSKI, ECA/PE/V/G/N; FOR LMOODY AND RREMEIKA, NEA/PPD DBENZE; NEA/PD FOR QUINN

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SUBJECT: SHARIA' LAW FACULTY PRAISE THE "RELIGION IN AMERICA" IV PROGRAM, JANUARY 26 - FEBRUARY 14, 2004

1. Summary. Ambassador Gnehm and PA met on Feb. 25 with three Sharia' Law graduate students who also assist in the mosques in Ma'an, Mafrag and the outskirts of Amman. A cleric from Ma'an -- an area known for its Salafi and gun-running ties to Saudi Arabia-- told us that immediately on returning he held a Khutba after Friday prayers, saying that "the spirit of Islam" was to be found everywhere among the America and calling for a distinction between the objectionable American foreign policies and the ordinary citizens of the United States. "I was one of the toughest preachers against America and everything American," he said, so people were astonished by my words. There was so much talk in Ma'an about my description of America that the local high school invited me to give a talk on the secret behind America's success as a society."

The other two part-time preachers said that they too had been besieged by people wanting to hear their impressions of America -- as men of religion. One of them said that he gave a sermon to 2,000 in which he spoke of his warm reception in America by Christians and Jews eager to learn about Islam first-hand. End Summary

-More Dialogue Wanted

2. Though the Sharia' Law students strongly denounced U.S. policy in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they said that their view of American society and culture had changed radically as a result of their visit. They urged us to open up more channels for them to communicate with Americans, especially Christians and Jews, in order to conduct a dialogue about common religious values. The returned IVs offered to brief outgoing IVs to allay their fears about their reception in America. They also encouraged us to hold regular meetings for the returned IVs to maintain the linkages, something we will make every effort to do. For example, Ambassador Gnehm has hosted iftars for this group and other exchange alumni over the past two years. Secondly, the Muslim clerics described a powerful thirst for more direct contact and credible information about Americans among their conservative Islamic communities. PA hopes to enroll several of these participants in our ALC's English classes to prepare them for possible academic exchanges, and to conduct more programs with this important, religiously conservative audience.

A Challenging Program, but Worth It

3. Over the years, the Religion in America IV has not been always easy to administer, largely because of the conservative Islamic orientation of many of the participants. Nevertheless, here in Jordan it is one of our most effective means of challenging stereotypes about American society, religion and culture among a large segment of religiously conservative youth.

Our special thanks and greetings from the IVs to escorts Apkar Hagopian and Mohamed Shaheen. Our deep appreciation as well to Robin Remeika and the Academy of Educational Development who managed this program through some very rough spots. In our opinion, the impact on these three people and their communities made it very worthwhile.

Hale